Collaborative Evaluation Unit (CEU)
Supporting Innovative Research and Evaluation

‘I AM READY’ PARTNERSHIP
PROGRAM EVALUATION
1 February 2019 -30 June 2020
SUMMARY
Dressing for Success: "They stood up *straighter* and with more *confidence* when they came out of the change room in their new clothes, and that was a big step for their *self-esteem*.

Mock Interviews: "Once students had done their interview, they were all feeling very *proud* of themselves which is *fantastic*...I was very proud and quite overwhelmed, they had come such a long way".
‘I don’t think you can beat a kid that’s proud of what they’ve achieved. That’s pretty awesome’ (Teacher)

L to R: Bryce and Jasmine, participants, Rachael Murphy Program Co-ordinator and Andrea Evans-McCall, NDCO Officer, ‘I Am Ready’ Transition Forum, Sale 2020
SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION FINDINGS

The ‘I Am Ready’ Program was an innovative approach to engaging secondary school students with learning barriers, to think, plan and actively move towards employment and or further education and training. This summary has been divided into five sections which demonstrates the triangulation of the evaluation findings, highlights the key findings and includes; Reach of the program, Lessons learnt, Breaking down barriers, Building confidence and Bright future for participants and the Program.

REACH OF THE PROGRAM

The ‘I Am Ready’ Project Team targeted 40 schools in six local government areas across the Gippsland region in Victoria, with the objective of enrolling a minimum of 90 participants in the Program. The Team actively engaged with 33 schools, who supported the 89 students who enrolled in the Program. Of those, 75 completed the Program, 11 commenced, attending up to week four before withdrawing, while three did not start, stating that the Program was not suitable for them.

LESSONS LEARNT

There were a number of lessons learnt throughout the duration of the Program by Facilitators, the ‘I Am Ready’ Project Team, schools, parents, employers and the participants. It became evident that in order to deliver the Program successfully, it was necessary for the Facilitators to adopt a variety of teaching strategies, remaining flexible to the learning styles and needs of the participants. Facilitators and volunteers noted that a more detailed description of each of the participants learning barriers at the start of the Program would assist with session planning and delivery.

The evaluation identified that improving the communication strategy would greatly enhance the experience of all involved with the Program in the future. This should include ensuring participants fully understand the Program during the recruitment phase, educating the schools and parents about the benefits of the Program, providing regular updates to schools and parents, and enhancing facilitator and volunteer staff training. The participants suggested that the Program should cover electronic communication such as emails, texting and phone etiquette in more detail. Overall, the comments received about the level of communication during the Program were positive:

“I think there’s nothing but positives .... from the way the programme was set up, we were kept informed, it was very well organised, the processes were great. Nothing slipped through the cracks. It was fantastic” (Teacher).

Jamie and Clare working with Baw Baw Shire Parks and Gardens Crew
BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

It was identified that the ‘I Am Ready’ Program filled a gap that currently exists in mainstream education, where students with learning barriers often do not receive the level of support needed to make a successful transition from school to employment, further education or training. The Program provided participants with an opportunity to take part in a program specifically tailored to their learning needs and styles, giving them the opportunity to learn the skills required to find employment or enrol in further education or training:

“It’s definitely highlighted to me the shortfalls in secondary school education for students with disabilities or learning barriers for the resources to support that.”

Teachers and parents alike were impressed with the participants’ engagement in the Program as they demonstrated transferable skills outside of the Program,

“...these kids are so capable of doing so much, it’s just getting out there.”

Employers involved in the Program responded positively to the experience with 88% stating that they would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the future. Employers found the participants to be polite, prepared and open to receiving instructions while on work experience and a number secured part time employment. Getting to know individual participants who took part in the Program and undertook work experience enhanced the level of understanding all round:

“I think people actually having an understanding of her was probably one of the challenges, but as they got to know her, and that it became much easier.”

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Throughout the Program there was clear evidence that the participants grew in confidence. The two most predominant words in a group activity in Workshop 2 ‘Reflections’ were confidence and improved self:

Stakeholders taking part in focus groups agreed that there was a dramatic change in the participants confidence from the beginning of the Program to its conclusion which was also demonstrated at home,
in school and in the work environment. The increase in confidence also translated to increased independence with many participants arranging their own travel to and from the Program and showing a desire to take part in the mock interview and work experience components.

The Program engendered a strong sense of belonging. Participants were a part of a group of like-minded individuals and that contributed to feelings of connectiveness and encouraged them to learn from each other:

“...she just likes being a part of something because as growing up through school, she was ostracised because she was different, and I think it's being incorporated, and everyone was the same”.

The Program also contributed to employer confidence to host a participant from the ‘I Am Ready’ Program in the future. It highlighted the possibility of employing an individual with a learning barrier or disability and the value of a diverse and inclusive workforce. Parents were impressed with the visible changes to their children’s attitudes towards the future, with many empowered to investigate the possibility of further education or employment. The school survey highlighted the positive changes in participant’s attitudes towards the teachers, improved classroom behaviour and increased engagement and communication.

**BRIGHT FUTURE FOR PARTICIPANTS AND THE PROGRAM**

The benefits of the Program was noted by all stakeholders, with many participants becoming self-reflective about their own development:

“It gets you ready for the workforce. They teach you a lot of skills that you need when you go for an interview and what skills you need when you're at work.”

There were a number of recommendations concerning the content of the Program being integrated into the school system with extension programs such as resume writing skills. It should be noted that 94% of the teachers involved in the Program agreed that they would highly recommend it. The benefits were visible with participants becoming more engaged and developing a social connection with the ‘I Am Ready’ Team, Facilitators and each other.

Many of the participants were visibly upset at the completion of the Program, however, through social media, many of them have continued to stay in touch with each other and have become firm friends. All five Facilitators indicated that they would be happy to be involved again in the Program, ensuring the continued development of the content delivery, group activities, training of volunteers and participant engagement skills. The Program has demonstrated the positive impact of a work readiness program for participants with learning barriers in the Gippsland region. Further research and evaluation are required to ascertain the long-term impact on the employability of the participants in the future.

The immediate impact on the increased confidence levels of the participants of the ‘I Am Ready’ Program is to be commended.
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

• The program is valuable and worthy of refinement for future delivery and continuation
• An inclusive program should be delivered to all students. As with reasonable adjustment requirements in all areas of the education curriculum, students with learning barriers require specific adjustments in their employability skill development and work exploration beyond what is currently offered in schools.
• Ongoing effort is needed to challenge historical attitudes about the meaning of a ‘career’ for individuals with a disability.
• Education providers explore opportunities to enable young people to find their tribe in order to cultivate peer support and self-belief.

Case Study – Sally*

Sally was an enthusiastic participant in the ‘I Am Ready’ Program. She was recommended to the Program by her teachers at school as she lacked confidence in her ability to gain employment. Sally’s confidence and aspiration about being able to gain future employment had previously been affected when she experienced some significant discrimination during a job interview upon disclosing her disability.

Sally was a committed participant to the Program. For example, one week when she knew she would not make the following session she brought a portable memory stick so she could record the videos, watch and complete the activities in the Workbook. During the ‘I Am Exploring’ sessions Sally was able to recognise her own strengths based around the employability skills which were articulated during her shining mock interview.

Sally completed her work experience component at a local supermarket. She was so excited to begin the opportunity she started during the school holidays. She was thrilled to be able to gain experience in a workplace as she wanted the opportunity to build on her time management and customer service skills. Sally realised through this experience that she needed a supervisor to show her the task required as opposed to just instructing.

At Sally’s mock interview she was able to demonstrate her employability skills so well that she was referred for an employment opportunity locally by her interviewer. Sally approached the workplace regarding the position and was able to communicate where she needed support, completed a trial and gained employment in a busy kitchen.
THE PROGRAM

Stage 1: ‘I Am Exploring’

This first stage of the program focused on building confidence and exploring areas of interest for work experience. It delivered training in employability skills including:

- Communication
- Technology
- Self-management
- Problem solving
- Teamwork
- Planning
- Initiative and enterprise
- Learning

Activities included team building, dressing for success, mock interviews, industry visits and Career Conversation Workshops for parents, carers and educators.

Stage 2: ‘I Am Becoming Ready’

This stage provided a bridge between developing employability skills and work experience by providing coordinated assistance in applying for and undertaking work experience, supported by an industry buddy. Participants were mentored in the workplace as well as being given time to reflect on their experience.

This stage provided an opportunity for employers to realise and learn about the contribution of workers with learning barriers and disabilities and the value of a diverse and inclusive workforce.
Stage 3: ‘I Am Ready’

The final stage in the Program provided participants with the opportunity to attend sessions that included:

- Goal setting and career planning.
- Resume writing delivered by TAFE Gippsland, Skills & Jobs Centre.
- Healthy mindsets delivered by Headspace, National Youth Mental Health Foundation.
- Post-school Transition supported by: Disability Employment Services (DES), National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) with information delivered by Latrobe Community Health Services (LCHS), TAFE Gippsland, Skills & Jobs Centre, Federation University, Gippsland East Higher Education Study Hub, people with lived experience of disability, volunteer organisations, Headspace, employers and other local support services.

Participants were also supported to pursue part-time employment, additional work experience, further training such as TAFE programs, school-based apprenticeships or structured workplace learning.

TESTIMONIAL

A participant’s schoolteacher checked in with the coordinator to see what his behaviour had been like during the I Am Ready sessions as he had been in trouble at school for unacceptable classroom behaviours. The Facilitator advised that the participant is a model student who participates well and appears to be getting along with other participants without incident. In addition, the participant’s mother messaged the coordinator to advise that the Friday of the Program was the only day she did not have trouble getting him to go to school. He is very excited about his placement opportunity this term.

Aiden completed work experience at KND Services, Morwell
Case Study – Phil*

Phil was a Year 10 student when it was suggested by his school careers teacher that he might benefit from participating in the ‘I Am Ready’ Program. Building his confidence and goal setting for the future would hopefully provide him with the skills needed to pursue his career interests.

He was struggling to engage with work related skills activities such as resume writing and his inability to communicate and collaborate with others was noted as a potential barrier to future employment or work experience activities.

At the beginning of the 8 week ‘I Am Exploring’ stage of the Program, Phil wasn’t keen to engage in activities or class discussions. He spent a lot of time drawing in his workbook. As the weeks progressed, the Facilitator realised that he was taking in the content. Opportunities to engage one-to-one produced some great conversations indicating that he was developing an understanding of employability skills and the world of work.

Phil had a very successful work experience placement where his employer was able to identify that he was very skilled and interested in information technology and office administration. He received a glowing report from his host employer in the form of a letter and was invited back in to complete some more work experience with potential for part-time employment.

Phil decided to exit the school system in June 2020. He contacted his host employer for work experience about any potential work opportunities. In response, Phil was offered a part time role with the company as a Junior IT Administrator.

FROM PHIL’S PARENT

“I wanted to say thank you for how much we have seen Phil grow through the Program. Through the work experience placement he has grown in his comfort with receiving positive feedback (regularly discounted/undermined it previously), confidence in his appearance (no more hiding in hoodies, rather wearing his work clothes with pride), initiative to step in and problem solve. After receiving his feedback from his employer at the conclusion of work experience for the first time in a long time he was genuinely happy and proud. He couldn’t stop smiling’’.

FROM PHIL’S EMPLOYER

“Just wanted to touch base and let you know that Phil has joined the team on a part time basis as our Junior IT Administrator and has begun working for us today, hitting the ground running!”

[Phil's Parent's Name]

[Phil's Employer's Name]
What the Participants, Facilitators and Volunteers, Parents and Teachers Said

**TRIBE: The Importance of Belonging**

“Just seeing them interact as a group was really heart-warming and seeing the bond that they’d built. They’d found their friends; they found their tribe.”

“They were sitting quite far apart from each other. There was a lot of heads down. As the weeks progressed, they formed friendships.”

“I don’t ever see that level of love, it’s beautiful. It’s allowing these kids to be together and grow together.”

“I couldn’t believe it when they actually said, all three of them, I don’t have friends and that connection is so important in their lives.”

‘Students had at last found their Tribe.’

**LEARNING Went Both Ways**

“I had three really marvellous support workers. Sometimes I’d get them to read a couple of paragraphs and we’d stop and have a bit of a discussion and then move on. We just tried some things like that to stop the interest from flagging, otherwise, they just zone out.”

“I realised a bit late quite a few had literacy problems. They would literally rather be seen as lazy than incapable.”

The training and resources were: “Exceptionally organised ... everything was there a week prior. I was really impressed with the resources, all their workbooks. I had a lot of information.”

Facilitators took part in “Role-play with our support staff who we did the inappropriate interview [with] and they loved that. They thought it was hilarious.”
Volunteers working alongside participants acknowledged that: “A lot of them needed more **hands-on** help. Some of them may be working ahead, but not talking. Some of them needed people to sit down and help them through everything.”

**BUILDING** Confidence

During the mock interview process “…you could just clearly see he was acing it because the **industry** experts who were interviewing him were beaming ear to ear’. Another participant ‘come out right on cue and he’s just gone ‘**smashed it**’. It was just like there it is, that just tells you what this Program does.”

“I think that’s a really great thing that’s come out of the Program that they now see themselves as able now to take that step.”

The Project Team recognised that: “If we can empower others to see that these guys are being **embraced** for all their differences, and that they’ve got, the skill and the **ability** and that you’re also inadvertently supporting the parents to let go and let them fly, then that’s the overall benefits of this Program.”

Volunteers noted it was: “Good to see friendships had formed by week 5 and students sitting in the bus chatting away to each other, laughing and enjoying the bus trip.”

“Once students had done their interview, they were all feeling very **proud** of themselves which is fantastic….I was very proud and quite overwhelmed, they had come such a long way in such a short period of time”.

“…overall, the course was fantastic, the students came a very long way in such a short period of time’, and that there was ‘lots of genuine **appreciation** from the students, some clearly disappointed that Stage 1 was complete.”

**FILLING** the gap

“…some students who fall between the cracks … That don’t actually get identified with funding but still need that additional **support**.”
“It’s definitely highlighted to me the **shortfalls** in secondary school education for students with disabilities or learning barriers for the resources to support that.”

I think there’s nothing but positives. ... from the way the Program was set up, we were kept informed, it was very well organised, the processes were great. Nothing slipped through the cracks. It was fantastic.”

“I had one of my students who was very withdrawn. No confidence at all. We brought her over to the I Am Ready last year and just the **change** in her was just **dramatic** within the first couple of weeks.”

“I think [my child] had a false idea of what work really is. I don't think she realised what it entailed until she **experienced** it’, ... another parent stated, ‘...that they learned that I can't just be there and just say, I don't feel like working today, that's not a **choice**.”

“...they teach me how to like, to not be nervous and don’t like fiddle around during a job interview.”

“It gets you **ready** for the workforce. They teach you a lot of **skills** that you need when you go for an interview and what you - what skills you need when you're at work.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Collaborative Evaluation Unit (CEU), Federation University, Gippsland Campus acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land, sea and nations and pay our respect to elders, past and present.

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For a copy of the full report and more information about the CEU go to:

www.federation.edu.au/ceu